



## Family Liaison Office

# Direct Communication Project

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## Thriving as a Foreign Service Spouse

*This paper is appealing because while acknowledging the difficulties a Foreign Service spouse encounters, it also offers strategies on how to thrive - not just survive. The authors, Melissa Hess and Joanne Grady-Huskey, look at what has worked and what hasn't worked for them. By looking at the positive and the negative, they achieve a sense of balance and offer good advice in a straight forward style.*

*Melissa Hess is a Foreign Service spouse who has accompanied her husband on tours in Kaduna, Leningrad, Washington, and Oran. She earned a Master of Arts in education from American University in Washington D.C. and is also a Registered Nurse. Melissa is active in professional English-teaching organizations and has developed language classes and cross-cultural programming to help international students and business professionals adjust to life in the United States. She is also a Hospice volunteer. Her two portable careers have enabled her to teach English as a Second Language in Europe, Africa, and the United States, and practice nursing in the Washington area.*

*Joanne Grady-Huskey is a Foreign Service spouse who has accompanied her husband, James, on tours in Beijing, Madras, and Nairobi. For her work with the disabled in China, she was the 1991 recipient of the Secretary of State's award for volunteerism for Asia and the Pacific. Joanne founded Global Adjustments, a relocation company that specializes in cross-cultural training. She has helped families from many international corporations relocate and adjust to life abroad. She recently founded the Resource Network Association (RNA), a network or professional spouses living in Nairobi, Kenya.*

*The Family Liaison Office would like this to be the first interactive Direct Communication Paper. In other words, we invite you to send us your comments, personal experiences, or strategies that have worked for you. We will incorporate what we learn into the next edition of this paper.*

On the surface, life in the Foreign Service appears glamorous -- international travel, contact with exciting new cultures, and acquiring foreign languages. The lifestyle may seem an enticing alternative to life in small-town USA. The Foreign Service spouse quickly discovers, however, that the glamorous moments may be few and far between, while the challenges and stresses are a daily reality.

Most of us value a supportive family, a fulfilling job, a network of friends, and a com-

fortable home. Losing any one of these is a traumatic event. Yet, for the Foreign Service spouse, each new assignment means leaving a home, giving up a job, saying good-bye to friends, and being cut off from family members in the States. Though Foreign Service life offers many unique opportunities and advantages, it also exacts a cost.

To be sure, Foreign Service officers experience these same disruptions, but with one important difference. Despite the hardships

or inconveniences, the officer has the continuity of his or her chosen career. He or she grows professionally with each new assignment, holds a respected position as a representative of the United States government, and has the support of colleagues. In many cases, officers spend the better part of each day in a familiar, American-style work environment.

Spouses, on the other hand, start over again with each move. They are told where to live and with what to furnish their house or apartment. They must quickly learn how to provide all the family's needs in a new city, while coping with a foreign culture and using a foreign language. Employment potential is usually limited to jobs available through the Embassy, many of which are clerical and classified as "PIT" positions. The spouse rarely has an opportunity to build on prior educational or professional experience.

Little wonder the spouses often feel that control of their lives has been wrenched out of their hands. Reactions vary from mild frustration to temporary depression, to attempts to flee the apparent source of the problem. In extreme cases, families may be torn apart by divorce.

It is important to realize that you are not alone if you have feelings of isolation or loss of control and that an initial sense of frustration or anger is normal. But before permitting yourself to make choices with far-reaching consequences for you, your spouse, and your family, try to step back from the frustrations and look for ways to reclaim some control over your life. There is no magic formula that will work for everyone in coping with the unavoidable stress that accompanies life as a Foreign Service spouse, but here are a few strategies we have seen used successfully for regaining a sense of control when the flood of new, demanding experiences threatens to overwhelm you.

### **Play an equal part in the bid process**

Assignments impact the lives of the officer, spouse, and children, so knowing the realities before bidding can save headaches later. Learning what the realities are may include reading the Overseas Briefing Center reports; talking to people who have been there; researching lifestyle, work, and school options; and writing or e-mailing people currently at post. Once the "homework" is complete, discussing the results allows all members of a family to play a part in the bid process and reach a general consensus.

### **Learn as much of the language as possible**

Everyone agrees that speaking the local language allows a person to function more effectively in a new culture. Enrolling in longer, intensive language classes before leaving the United States provides a solid foundation on which to build at post. If time is limited, a FAST course at the Foreign Service Institute can help to acquire basic survival vocabulary. Even a brief amount of language training will prove useful once at post.

Learning a language is a never-ending process, and each post will offer its own opportunities for continued language study. In some cases, it will be possible to find a tutor or enroll in a class. At any post, language learning can take place outside the classroom by using what you have learned in daily encounters with the new culture (provided that you set aside the fear of making mistakes). Once you have acquired a basic vocabulary, making friends with someone from the new culture can dramatically improve speaking skills. In addition, making friends with local people allows you to view the culture from another perspective. Language skills open doors that would otherwise be closed; therefore, becoming as proficient as possible in a new language ultimately enhances the quality of life overseas.

**Immerse yourself in the culture**

One of the unique advantages Foreign Service life offers is an opportunity to experience new and interesting places. Get out and see the sights, smell the smells, taste the foods--experience all that the culture has to offer. This does not mean "going native," but it does mean putting some time and thought into activities like studying the history, going to museums, and attending local festivals or holiday celebrations. Everyone gets more out of life at post by being open to new experiences.

**Travel as much as possible**

Take every opportunity to see historic sites or places of interest in the country where you are living. The countryside will differ from the city, showing you another aspect of the culture. You may miss unique opportunities if you put travel off until the end of the tour. Apart from the recreational aspect, traveling provides a better understanding of people, customs, and traditions.

**Set goals for yourself**

What do you want to accomplish in the 2 or 3 years you have in the country? Upon arrival, consider the options available and set realistic goals. Your ideas may be personal or family directed, such as enjoying your children, learning to cook local cuisine, or reading all the books you never had time for. Your ideas may be career-oriented, such as working to develop marketable skills for use in the future. Whatever the goals, they can help provide a framework and sense of purpose for utilizing your time overseas. Review your goals periodically and change them, if necessary.

**Find ways to keep your career alive**

In most cases, maintaining a career while overseas is very difficult. However, with creativity and lots of hustle, you may beat the odds and find a job that changes the

parameters of your chosen career or allows you to work in a field related to your expertise.

Begin to research employment opportunities as soon as you know your new assignment. Investigate bilateral work agreements (if applicable) and contact U.S. companies with branch offices in country. Consider how you can best apply your skills in ways that maintain your professional development. Options may include contracting with international firms to do special projects, teaching or coordinating training programs in your area of expertise, starting a small business, or even writing a book.

In small posts, however, many of these possibilities do not exist. Nevertheless, before you decide to stop your career because you are moving overseas, do some research and investigate options. In some cases, you may be able to find or create employment that allows you to grow professionally. When posted to a place where employment is not possible, look for other ways to enhance your career - perhaps by taking correspondence courses.

**Make your home a wonderful place**

However different or difficult the culture, create for yourself and your family an environment that is pleasing and comfortable. Fill your home with your favorite things. If you like, create your own space--a special room or corner that is uniquely yours. Don't leave your belongings in moving boxes for an extended period; instead organize your home as soon as possible. Knowing you have a wonderful home will make you feel more comfortable venturing out into the new culture.

**Find something positive to do**

Coping is easier if you feel you are contributing to those around you. Look at the options available. Pick something constructive and satisfying--whether paid or voluntary--and something that uses your skills. For example,

you may be the only person in the entire country who knows ballroom dancing or has a background in special education. Your talents can make a major contribution. Many countries have charitable organizations that are always in need of help. Whatever your abilities, find a way to make a positive contribution to the mission, the foreign community, or to the country.

### **Find or create support**

Look for the positive people at post who share your interests. Join a reading club, hiking club, or another type of group that can give you support. In many posts, these may not be available. If this is the case, form a group of your own, such as a gourmet dining club, a biking club or a play group for you and your child. Finding people with similar interests provides a community for you to share experiences or difficulties with and also to call on as resources.

### **Maintain contact with family and friends**

Share your cultural experiences with family and friends through postcards, letters, e-mail, or video or audio tapes. You will benefit by gaining a new perspective on your personal experiences while keeping family ties active.

Current computer technology provides instantaneous communication with the outside world. E-mail is a fun and, in some countries, relatively inexpensive way to stay in touch with the important people in our lives. In addition, there are software packages that make international phone calls over the Internet possible. Most countries (though not all) have access to the Internet. Check before you leave for post. A computer can link you and the world and keep networks with family, friends, and former colleagues intact.

### **Be conscious of your reactions to stress**

Invariably, Foreign Service life exposes us to situations beyond our control--natural

disasters, no electricity or water, political unrest, horrible weather, dirt, crime, evacuation, or illness. How to cope with a particular problem will vary with each individual. When nothing can be done to change the situation, the only viable option may be to try to make the best of it. When this happens, a discussion of the difficulties with family and friends facing the same problem can be a step in the right direction. With discussion, it may be possible to determine ways to make the situation workable. Shared difficulties often bring people closer together.

### **Tackle the hardships as a team**

Approaching hardships as a partnership alleviates feelings of isolation and provides emotional support. If a situation proves to be especially difficult, a constructive approach to problem solving works best. Making comparisons to other posts, harboring resentment, or blaming others is counter-productive. Communicating openly and positively, listening carefully to what the other person is saying, and considering options for possible solutions yields better results. Though this is easier said than done, it still remains a positive, rational approach to dealing with the bumps all of us hit at some time when living overseas.

Being a Foreign Service spouse does not have to mean relinquishing control over your life. It can, in fact, be an impetus for forming a deeper understanding of who you really are and what you value in life. One Foreign Service spouse said, "By being thrust into situations beyond my control, I was forced to look inward, draw upon my own resources, and set my priorities in ways that would not have confronted me had I remained in a steady career path and lifestyle." All of us can survive and thrive by "drawing upon our own resources." We can meet the challenges with determination, creativity, stamina, resourcefulness, and, most of all, flexibility.